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The Translation Strategies of Film Subtitles from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

-- A Case Study of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

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Abstract: This essay analyzes the subtitle translation strategies employed in the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) based on the Skopos theory. The analysis identifies four key strategies employed in subtitling: condensation, clarification, idiomatic usage and artistry, which ensure both accessibility and emotional resonance for global audience. The study highlights how Skopos theory can guide the subtitling process to facilitate intercultural communication and the global enjoyment of films.

Keywords: Subtitle translation; Translation strategies; Skopos theory; Film

1. Introduction

Skopos theory, proposed by Hans Vermeer and Reiss the late 1970s, contains three core principles: skopos rule, cohesion rule and fidelity rule. For the skopos rule, “translator’s skopos or aim is the decisive factor in a translation project”^[1]. The translator should prioritize the intended purpose of the translation and decided the most suitable translation approach based on the purpose. The cohesion rule emphasizes the translation should be coherent and understandable in the target culture while the fidelity rule stresses the reflection of the original message but allows the translator to adapt the source material to achieve the intended purpose of the translation.

This theory is particularly relevant in film subtitling^[2]. In the case of film subtitles, the purpose is twofold: first, to make the dialogue comprehensible for the target audience to achieve intercultural exchange^[3]; second, to evoke the same emotional response as if it were the source audience so that the audience can enjoy the film. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a Wuxia or martial arts film, became the first Chinese film to win the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film. The film, featuring a blend of action, drama and philosophical dialogues, achieves great success, with the subtitle translation playing a significant role. Therefore, the study takes the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as a case study to explore how Skopos theory inform the translation strategies in subtitling.

2. Analysis of Subtitles of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Men*

2.1 Condensation

Due to the “limitation of time and space”^[4], subtitle translation should be smooth and clear. Extra information should be omitted. The subtitles for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* effectively condense longer Chinese phrases into short, meaningful English sentences.

Example 1:

Chinese dialogue: wai tou ren duo wo tou yun, xiang zhao ge qing jing de di fang tou qi 00:08:43, 571 --> 00:08:47, 991

English subtitle: I was just looking for a quite corner.

In the dialogue, the first part “there are many people outside and I feel dizzy” (wai tou ren duo wo tou yun) is a subtle excuse. The character isn’t really asking for relief from dizziness but for solitude. The translation “looking for a quite corner” focuses directly on the core intention and is more efficient in expressing what the character actually wants. The translation is not only concise but also clear, adhering to Skopos theory by prioritizing the function of the subtitle: to communicate the character’s intent succinctly to the audience.

Example 2:

Chinese dialogue: ni mao chong dao jiao, qian ru wu dang, dao zou xin kuai, du hai wo shi fu. 00:36:00, 991 --> 00:36:03, 231

English subtitle: You stole our secret manual and poisoned master.

The translation is quite concise. It combines the key actions “stealing”(dao zou) and “poisoning”(du hai) and the victims “secret manual”(xin kuai) and “master”(shi fu) into short, direct clauses. The long list of action is shorten to efficiently convey the core message while

reducing redundancy. The translation focuses on brevity aligns with the functional goal of making the subtitle easily readable.

2.2 Clarification

It is essential to take into account the acceptance of the target audience when dealing with information related to cultural differences because of linguistic differences^[5]. Therefore, in some instances, the translator should clarify the meaning of culturally specific expression for target audience. According to the fidelity rule, such clarification is permitted when the target viewers may not be familiar with the culture references.

Example 1:

Chinese dialogue: gen zhe wo re lai le bu shao de jiang hu en yuan. 00:03:58, 979 --> 00:04:02, 469

English subtitle: Too many men have died at its edge.

The phrase “conflicts or grudges in Jianghu”(jiang hu en yuan) encompasses various forms of negative interactions, like fights, misunderstandings. But in subtitle, it is shifted to “men have died”, focusing on death rather than rivalries. The translation changes the wide meaning to narrow expression, which is more easier for audience to understand. In addition, in subtitle, the phrase “at its edge” is a metaphorical way of conveying the danger or conflict, which clearly identifies the source of these issues as the Jianghu or martial world.

Example 2:

Chinese dialogue: ke wo gan du, zei ren yu yu da ren jia you gua ge, cha ta ge di er diao. 00:21:17, 051 --> 00:21:18, 281

English subtitle: I'm sure the thief is in the Yu household.

The original dialogue includes phrases like “I dare bet”(gan da du), “the thief is connected to the Governor Yu and is hidden in Yu's house”(zei ren yu yu da ren jia you gua ge) and “investigate him thoroughly”(cha ta ge di er diao), which are specific and action-oriented. They might not be immediately clear to all viewers. The translator condenses the complex sentence into a straightforward statement that captures the essence of the original meaning. By focusing on the main point of the dialogue “the thief is connected to the Yu household”, the subtitle simplifies the original while ensuring the audience understands the critical element of the plot.

2.3 Idiomatic usage

An important aspect of subtitling is ensuring that the translation sounds natural in the target language while retaining the original meaning. Taking language habits and aesthetic expressions of viewers into consideration would bring the film much closer to the audience. From the Skopos theory, the use of idiomatic expressions would be more familiar to the target audience, enhancing both fluency and emotional impact.

Example 1:

Chinese dialogue: xie tian xie di, yu gu niang xin ku le. 00:05:25, 069 --> 00:05:27, 739

English subtitle: Everything got here safely. I'm much obliged.

The dialogue indicates that the young lady Yu has provided significant assistance to the speaker, who is deeply grateful for her efforts. The translation “I'm much obliged” is an idiomatic and polite expression in English, capturing the speaker's gratitude. This phrase not only conveys the original meaning but also brings the subtitle closer to the cultural expectations of the English-speaking audience, fulfilling the functional goal of the emotional resonance.

Example 2:

Chinese dialogue: you shen me bi dou liu zai yu da ren fu li geng an quan de. 00:31:16, 009 --> 00:31:18, 469

English subtitle: Is there any place safer than under the nose of Governor Yu?

The subtitle “under the nose of” is a common idiomatic expression in English, which means “very close to someone's attention” implying that the place is under constant supervision. The idiom adds a layer of meaning not present in the original dialogue. It suggests that the safety of the place is ensured precisely because it is under the close watch of Governor Yu. The translation employs a well-known English idiom which is not only convey essence of original meaning, but also makes it more accessible to the target audience.

2.4 Artistry

In the film, there are lots of rhythmic dialogues full of Chinese philosophy. Being part of the the film, the esthetic value of dialogue should be preserved. As Wangying said, “in subtitle translation, translator should first respect the original text, and then maximize insight in the aesthetic expectations of the target audience”^[5]. In the case, the film's subtitles approach it by using parallel structure in English, keeping the artistry and reducing cultural barriers at the same time.

Example 1:

Chinese dialogue: Li mu bai jiu shi xu ming, zong pai shi xu ming, jian fa ye shi xu ming. 00:44:14, 937 --> 00:44:18, 727

Subtitle: Like most things, I am nothing.

The dialogue has a certain philosophical and existential tone. The use of “empty name”(xu ming) implies that all the accomplishments, the martial arts skills, and the identity associated with the character are hollow. The subtitle distills the complex idea into the short sentence “like most things, I am nothing.” This artistic adaptation retains the emotion of the original sentiment, offering a simpler yet more universal reflection. Besides, the use of “like most things” introduces a gentle cadence before delivering the emphatic finality of “ I am nothing”.

Example 2:

Chinese dialogue: Wu zhu, wu zhang; bu ying, bu bian; wu zhi, wu yuan. 00:45:04, 992 --> 00:45:13, 043

English subtitle: No growth without assistance. No action without reaction. No desire without restraint.

The subtitle transforms the short and sharp phrases of the original dialogue into balanced and poetic statements. The structure of the subtitle, with parallel phrasing and rhythmic flow “no...without...”, gives it a more melodic and elegant quality that improves its artistic impact. The rhythm makes the message more memorable, capturing the essence of the dialogue while presenting it in a more refined and aesthetically pleasing form.

3. Conclusion

The subtitle of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* offer a compelling case study of how Skopos theory inform translation strategies of film subtitle. The study concludes with four translation strategies: condensing abundant information, clarifying the meaning, using idiomatic expressions and keeping the artistry of dialogues. It demonstrates how the translator balances the core goal of making the film accessible to target audience while preserves the emotional depth of the original dialogue. These four strategies contribute to achieving the goal of intercultural exchange in subtitling, allowing the film to resonate with international audience.

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